



Photo: AS-PTA

Addressing the

With access to land, people can start growing crops for home consumption or for selling on the local market.

Starting with a few communities in three municipalities, by 2002 the programme covered 16 municipalities and included approximately 5000 families. Although this increase in the programme's geographic and social coverage was striking, it raised questions for AS-PTA about whether it was adequately reaching the most impoverished families. To address this concern, a study was conducted in three communities of Solânea, a municipality with a large number of families living in extreme poverty.

Studying poverty

The first objective was to arrive at a shared understanding of the concept of poverty. Discussions between agricultural leaders and community representatives revealed that poverty takes many forms: precarious access to land, water and biodiversity; hunger and food insecurity; marginalisation in terms of access to markets; poor access to basic services and to the benefits of public policies; and exclusion from local development processes. It became clear that poverty needs to be regarded as a combination of complex and interdependent elements. Poverty cannot only be seen as the lack of material goods – there is also a political and cultural dimension. In addition, poverty changes over space and time. For example, in dry periods, poverty worsens, and the number of poor rises. Moreover, although we usually take “poor families” as a reference point, we cannot disregard the existence of different levels of poverty within each family.

The initial data showed that not owning or not having access to land was a key element in defining the category of the “poorest” families. These are the ones who face the most barriers to joining activities related to agricultural development. This category is composed of the landless, families with very little land, and those who live on their parents' land. And within families, it is the women and the young (particularly young women) who have the most difficulties. They face serious cultural barriers to participating in decision-making, and are unlikely to get the same benefits from their family-based work compared to male adults.

Different expressions of poverty

The study found that extreme poverty is expressed in four main fields, each of which hinders local people's access to innovations and maintains their exclusion from social development processes: access to basic material resources, access to the benefits of public policies, access to markets, and access to civil society organisations. Along with restricted access to land, the main material needs come from problems in accessing water, food and income. Among the poorest families, 64 per cent had no land, or had to work within very restricted conditions for its use. Historically, this adverse situation led to relations of economic and political dependency on the use of third-party lands. This discouraged the uptake of innovations which could improve the infrastructure of local agricultural systems – for example, 70 per cent of the families had no facilities for collecting or storing water. Food insecurity was also found to be another permanent part of life for these families. Virtually all family members had to look for any kind of work.

Poor access to markets is another way in which the poorest families are excluded. As they lack access to transport, they

To what extent do rural development programmes allow for diversity in the social situations where they work? In particular, how can they take this diversity into account when seeking to involve and empower the poorest families? How can an agroecological focus and a gender approach help these families overcome poverty? These questions formed a central part of a study undertaken in Brazil's semi-arid region to improve the local development programme run by the non-governmental organisation AS-PTA.

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The Agreste region of the state of Paraíba, in Brazil's northeast, is known for its erratic climate, and often experiences long periods of drought. The environment influences the variety and composition of local agricultural systems, resulting in low yields and low production levels. Family farms make up 95 percent of rural establishments (or approximately 14 000 units), yet occupy only 52 percent of the land area. With little land available, the families have to intensify their land and soil use, making it difficult to maintain or regenerate the ecosystem's fertility. This creates a vicious circle of environmental, economic and social unsustainability.

Since 1993, a Brazilian NGO, Assessoria e Serviços a Projetos em Agricultura Alternativa (AS-PTA), has been implementing a rural development programme in this region, aiming to promote agricultural innovation and thereby encourage the agroecological conversion of local production systems. The programme is based on the hypothesis that the vicious circle of poverty can be overcome through making a transition to agroecological family farming systems, increasing incomes while also conserving the physical and biological base of the agroecosystems.

conditions for getting out of poverty

can rarely participate in markets or fairs, and thus have to buy and sell their goods in unfavourable conditions. The poorest families are also penalised when it comes to benefiting from public services. Access to formal education, public health and transport were found to be precarious. Although government social programmes provided an important part of household income for quite a number of families (e.g. providing gas for cooking and a basic allowance), implementation of such programmes was frequently irregular. In addition, these funds were often misused by local authorities for their own political benefit, and therefore did not reach their target public.

Finally, the weak participation of the poorest families in local organisations was also identified as a contributing factor to social exclusion. Families could not afford transport, or good clothes to wear to the meetings. And many social organisations lacked policies or programmes designed to tackle the specific conditions and questions concerning this sector.

Empowering the poorest

Having looked at poverty in detail, this study helped to define specific strategies to deal with the persistence of sociocultural and economic exclusion. The first and most significant finding was that the poorest families have their own survival strategies, which focus on ensuring the minimum conditions for the family to get by in the short-term. They are not enough to break out of poverty, while they do reveal the creative capacity of such families to manage their limited options. Among these, we could identify different social mechanisms which help lessen the most extreme hardships. For example, the tradition of voluntary working groups, or the borrowing or lending of seed, food and water. Individual strategies have also evolved, although these most frequently work through various types of “unequal partnerships” (including, for example, informal loans for buying food). In most cases, these strategies help maintain economic and political dependence on landowners, traders or local politicians. They also show how difficult it is for the poorest sector of society to escape the situation they find themselves caught in. The study therefore showed the need to redirect the programme towards building on the potential capacities of the poorest communities. Analysing the impacts of the programme’s earlier initiatives in the three studied communities showed that many of the innovations being adopted by less impoverished families were not adapted to suit the situations of the poorest, even though they very often matched their needs. These innovations included reforestation, improvement of the livestock farming system, or the construction of water supply infrastructures.

Five years after the study was conducted, and after its results were fed into AS-PTA’s strategy, some significant changes have taken place in the living conditions of the poorest families. These changes mark the beginning of breaking the vicious circle of poverty, and have been made possible by the combination of two factors. Firstly, activities were adjusted to encourage the poorest families to participate in local processes of agroecological innovation, providing better conditions for them to take up, or feel part of, innovative ideas that had been developed locally. Secondly, greater involvement of these families in community processes made it possible for them to take advantage of government policies, especially those related to guaranteeing access to and use of land. Some specific changes to the programme deserve highlighting:

1. *Diversifying financial options, and modifying the revolving loan funds (RLFs).* Until 2002, RLFs were mainly meant to provide funds to build cisterns to store water for domestic use. Since then, the creation of a community savings scheme has allowed the collective generation of funds in a way which is more sensitive to individual situations and needs. The funds can now also be used to buy other items such as organic manure, or materials for fencing and infrastructure.

2. *Improving kitchen gardens.* This initiative aimed to intensify production from domestic gardens. As well as having positive impacts on food security in the poorest families, this activity has helped to empower women, who now see their work in the gardens acknowledged by the wider community.

3. *Establishing local markets.* The agroecological fair in Solânea provided better conditions for the poorest families to bring their products to market. As well as enabling them to display their products, the fair has become a useful place for families who only produce small quantities, to sell their goods.

Additional advantages came from the initiative of thirty landless families, who organised themselves in order to benefit from a government land-access programme. A settlement area was located which assures 17 hectares for each family and five hectares for the community as a whole. With this, the families now find themselves able to take advantage of the innovations promoted by AS-PTA’s programme, and are no longer marginalised. Being able to manage their own production systems to generate income, and provide food and water security, these families are now freed from political and economic subjugation. At the same time, they have begun to take part in the programme’s training events.

Two main challenges

This study and its consequences have drawn attention to two main recurring challenges for rural development programmes:

1. It is important to recognise community survival strategies which are based on mutual exchange and local resources. This should lead to programme activities which strengthen these strategies. The agroecological perspective on which the programme was based was able to enhance the social processes, enabling survival strategies to be transformed and built into a collective local development project.

2. Only when the poorest family farmers are able to develop their own social inclusion projects will they benefit from policies which aim to assist them to escape from the mechanisms that perpetuate poverty. Social policies alone cannot overcome poverty, but they remain necessary as a response to social emergencies. Economic development policies are equally unable to break the cycle of poverty since they are based on technical and economic ideas that do not match the experiences and expectations of the most impoverished families. In order to include extremely poor rural populations in development programmes and ensure their empowerment, public policies must reflect the sociocultural and economic dimensions of marginalised and socially excluded people. ■

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